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Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Edgar Allan Poe's Use of Concealment

It is one of the most instinctive of human reactions to hide something broken before it can be discovered. The panic that it inspires is overwhelming, and no hiding spot seems good enough to avoid detection, spawning the guilty fear of when, not if, blame must be faced. If that kind of fear can be inspired by a child with a broken toy, imagine the spiral of panic and guilt experienced by a murderer with a dead body. Some of Edgar Allan Poe's most famous pieces of macabre fiction involve this severe deterioration of the sanity of a killer, with an intense focus on how and where the body is concealed. Poe frequently utilizes enclosure as a device to explore the impact of guilt upon the psyche of the encloser. As Poe scholar Leonard W. Engel says, "[The enclosure device] has a profound impact on the main character, often affecting his personality" (Engel 26). This impact is usually intense guilt and a buildup of insanity, but such feelings, as well as the timing of the crime being inevitably discovered, depends greatly on where the concealment occurs. The distance of the enclosure from the encloser's areas of daily life represents the weight of their guilt, with a shorter distance indicating more guilt, which directly correlates to how quickly they are caught, with the additional factors of why and how the murder was committed adding or

lessening said weight. In works such as “The Cask of Amontillado,” “The Black Cat,” and “The Tell-Tale Heart,” Edgar Allan Poe uses the act and outcomes of concealment as a way to deal with guilt and introduce consequence.

Of the three short stories, the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” is the one who has the most hands-on role in the murder, as well as the least solid reasoning behind the act. The narrator, having made up his mind to “take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever” (Poe 284), very calmly and systemically prepares and carries out a gruesome murder, all because an old man—whom the narrator admitted to loving—had an eye which made the narrator uneasy. He proceeds to kill the old man by crushing/suffocating him under his heavy bed, and then dismembering the body, bragging about his procedure: “First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs. I then took up three planks from the flooring of the chamber, and deposited all between the scantlings” (Poe 286). The narrator conceals the corpse right under his floorboards, the closest enclosure of any of the short stories. The narrator is cocky and arrogant in his actions, truly believing in the impossibility of his actions being revealed. However, symbolized by the closeness of the enclosure—the body quite literally being underfoot—his guilt of killing an innocent man grows exponentially within just hours of the act and manifests as an auditory hallucination: from under his floorboards, the narrator hears the beating of the dead old man’s heart, which grows louder and louder until, driven half-mad, the narrator reveals his own crimes: “‘Villains!’ I shrieked, ‘dissemble no more! I admit the deed! --tear up the planks! here, here! --It is the beating of his hideous heart!’”

(Poe 287). Of the three narrators, the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" seems the most profoundly impacted by the enclosure device, as he shifts from calm planning to raving lunacy. However, during his supposed calm and rational state, he continuously insists upon and brags about his own sanity, suggesting that his own guilt already lied closer to surface level than he wanted to admit.

Unlike in the previous case of "The Tell-Tale Heart," the narrator of "The Black Cat," has, loosely-speaking, more of a reasoning behind the murder he committed: his incredible, red-hot temper, which already proved lethal upon the earlier murder of his cat, Pluto. When his new cat nearly trips him on the stairs of his cellar, the narrator raises his axe to attack it, but when his blow is stopped by his wife, he "withdrew my arm from her grasp and buried the axe in her brain" (Poe 193). Dead within one blow, the narrator doesn't lay hands on his wife's body except to conceal it. "I determined to wall it up in the cellar -- as the monks of the middle ages are recorded to have walled up their victims" (Poe 193). Placing the corpse within a wall which he plasters shut, he leaves the cellar and returns to his life. The enclosure is further than in "The Tell-Tale Heart," but still close enough to the narrator that when "upon the fourth day of the assassination, a party of the police came" (Poe 194). the consequences of his actions hit him full force. Arrogantly confident in his own successful concealment of the body, he raps a cane on the wall, but soon discovers that the cat, which had been the cause of the temper flare that led to the narrator killing his wife, had been walled up with the corpse when it began howling. The next instant his cover was blown as "...a dozen stout arms were toiling at the wall. It fell bodily. The corpse, already greatly

decayed and clotted with gore, stood erect before the eyes of the spectators” (Poe 195). The relative closeness of the enclosure bought this narrator four days, but ultimately his guilt was not pushed a far enough distance away not to come back to haunt him.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the short story with the greatest distance between the enclosure and the encloser, as well as the only of the short story to have the murderer get away with his crime, is “The Cask of Amontillado.” The narrator, Montressor, had a motive built up from the “thousand injuries” (Poe 214) dealt to him by Fortunato, a jovial character who almost certainly didn’t think about how insulting he could be. Unlike the earlier two narrators, Montressor does not kill Fortunato within his own house, but instead takes him into his family vaults, already littered with human remains, under the guise of taking him to taste a pipe of supposed Amontillado wine. Leading him to “the most remote end of the crypt” (Poe 217), Montressor shackles Fortunato to a wall and proceeds to conceal the man by building a wall, trapping him in a niche. Montressor does not attack or kill by hand, in fact as he forces the last stones into place, he can still hear Fortunato’s voice. Eventually, the wall is completed: “I forced the last stone into its position; I plastered it up. Against the new masonry I re-erected the old rampart of bones. For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them” (Poe 218). Montressor’s guilt is buried so deep and far away that he manages to get away with his misdeed for upwards of fifty years. In fact, his crime may never have been discovered if not for himself revealing it, supposedly on his death bed. As Poe scholar Leonard W. Engel suggests,

Montresor, the narrator, it will be remembered, unlike the narrators in other tales (such as “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Black Cat”) who have murdered their victims and then tried to conceal their bodies, does succeed in concealing his crime, but it has so obsessed his memory and imagination that fifty years after the act, he is able to render an exact, detailed description as though it occurred the previous day (Engel 26).

Perhaps it is because of his brief encounter with guilt in his last few moments with Fortunato (“I called again -- “Fortunato!” No answer still... My heart grew sick..” [Poe 218]), which he attempts to blow off as feeling uneasy in the damp vault, that he is unable to let go of the incident completely.

Why is Montresor unable to completely forget his crime? Why does the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” go raving mad within hours of hiding the body? To understand this we must first establish that the impulse of Poe’s characters to hide their wrongdoing within walls and under floorboards—the enclosure/concealment tactic—is representative of their guilt. It is the product of a guilty conscience that has been met with panic, which always leads to the same initial response: hide before someone sees. From childhood we are self-programmed to behave this way—bad actions lead to punishment, and punishment is unpleasant, so as soon as a wrongdoing has been acknowledged, the immediate course of action is to hide or lie to avoid such a punishment. This instinct is one that must be conditioned out by understanding either that what you did deserves punishment (morals), or by understanding that if by trying to avoid punishment, the consequences will only be worse

in the long run. The initial problem with Poe's characters is overconfidence. The idea that the concealment is undetectable leads to the concealer leaving opportunity for discovery instead of acting discreetly. The other issue is the distance. When the concealment is close by or in a place that is often in view of the concealer, the wrong done remains on the mind and is unable to be forgotten about. That prominent presence in the mind allows the guilt to build and build like a cancer. Combined with the strain of fear of discovery and the sloppy openings left by the overconfidence, and it is only a matter of time before a breakdown or emergence of a mental illness (which in the case of these particular narrators is likely already present). The importance of this concept applies not just to macabre fiction, but also to the lives of average people. Hopefully there aren't too many people out there hiding their spouses in the walls of their home, but as was mentioned earlier, the instinct for concealment is embedded in all of us. There's a lesson to be learned in the psychology of these characters—deeper than "If you break something, don't hide it nearby." A deeper application of the concept is with the necessity of dealing with the consequences of bad actions and negative emotions as they come, rather than harboring them and letting them fester. Mental health is greatly dependent upon one's ability to be honest with themselves—opposed by the unnecessary self-justification of Poe's characters (e.g., The narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" who boasts about his own cleverness in how the murder is carried out). Most people have at some point experienced a dream in which they had to hide a body. The fear and panic are an incredibly strong drive, even in an imaginary setting. Burying those feelings don't make them vanish—they only dissipate when you face them head on. The exception here, however slightly, seems to be Montresor. His crime was more calculated

than the crimes of the other two narrators, fueled more by hurt ego than mental illness, and thus was planned and proceeded with in a way that limited the guilt response. Combined with the far distance from his daily life, and it makes sense why there was less of a brand of his crime marking him. However, in concealing his crime instead of facing his problem head on and accepting the consequences, Montessor is unable to completely let go of the past, opting instead to reveal himself fifty years later.

In several works of Edgar Allan Poe, concealment is used as an attempt to avoid consequence and repress guilt. In "The Cask of Amontillado," because he has been greatly insulted, Montessor traps Fortunato alive in the deepest corner of a catacomb, and doesn't reveal his crime for half a century. In "The Black Cat," the narrator's bad temper gets the best of him and he kills his wife with one blow of an axe to her head, walling her up in his cellar where she would be discovered four days later. In "The Tell-Tale Heart," the narrator kills a nice old man because he doesn't like his eye, killing him under the weight of a heavy bed and cutting the body into pieces hidden right under his floorboard, where they would be discovered within a few hours. In each case the factors that affect the outcome are the reason for killing, the method of killing, and the distance from the concealed body from the concealer. Poe uses concealment to explore the psychology of the concealer's guilty conscience and as a device which expresses the concealer's desire to remain undiscovered while ultimately being the cause of the imminent discovery. Poe's characters want to believe that out of sight means out of mind, but unfortunately for them, the truth will out itself.

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